

TV Weekend

Kennedy's Adventures, Before the White House

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

'Who Killed J. F. K., the Final Chapter?'

CBS, tonight at 9; 8 central time.

Once more unto that grassy knoll, assassination buffs. Tonight's two-hour "CBS Reports" is the network's sixth (and final?) attempt to address the persisting unease over who pulled the trigger or triggers.

One might think that with documentaries in such short supply on network television, news department resources might better be devoted to less investigated and more urgent matters. But as Dan Rather notes, a recent CBS poll found that 9 of 10 Americans (especially younger ones, possibly influenced by the Oliver Stone film "J. F. K.") doubt that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone and 4 out of 5 believe there has been some sort of cover-up. So yet another look does have some justification besides the opportunity for CBS News to recycle its film clips.

Most of the first hour of this skillfully stitched assemblage of old material and new is given to a recapitulation of the events in Dallas on that dire November day 30 years ago and of Oswald's strange, short life. Many of the pictures are unforgettable, many of the reminiscences are familiar. You can see Mr. Rather, who covered Kennedy's trip to Dallas, interviewing Walter Cronkite, who was then the "CBS Evening News" anchor. Or maybe Mr. Cronkite is interviewing Mr. Rather.

The program gets down to business in the second half. Leaning heavily on Gerald Posner, the author of the recent conspiracy-debunking book "Case Closed" (Random House), it concludes that suspicions of the Soviet Union, the C.I.A., the Mafia and Fidel Castro remain unsubstantiated; the accounts of three people who say they saw someone firing from the grassy knoll are dubious, and the latest computer reconstructions show that Oswald had more time to fire three shots than had been believed.

Mr. Rather attributes the continuing speculation about other guns and other sharpshooters to imaginations that refuse to be stilled by the evidence. Take that, Oliver Stone.

In his book "J. F. K.: Reckless Youth," the British biographer Nigel Hamilton tears into the Irish-American Kennedy family with a ferocity that a Boston Brahmin of the 1920's might have envied. They are portrayed as vulgar poseurs. Joe, the patriarch, is an unscrupulous businessman and a coward. His wife, Rose, is little more than a coldly pious and superficial woman. John F. Kennedy generally escapes the scorn, but only because he is perceived as an outsider, neglected and unappreciated until his older brother, Joe Jr., is killed in World War II.

Beginning on Sunday night, and continuing on Tuesday night, "J. F. K.: Reckless Youth" comes to television on ABC as a fairly standard four-hour movie. Commercial television once again runs true to form. The more inflammatory portions of the book are eliminated or muted, perhaps because the Kennedy family and their friends have publicly attacked the Hamilton book. What's left is another television portrait of John Kennedy that promotes style over substance, focusing on what ABC calls "intense passions and inspirational courage."

Followed here to the age of 29 and snared in an impressively cool performance by Patrick Dempsey, Jack Kennedy is a rebellious and thoroughly charming roustabout, despite an alarming history of serious illnesses. Like his father, he believes that women are objects put on earth for his own private delectation. Rules are for other people. He announces to a prep-school chum that "we're going to New York." Friend: "But it's against the rules." Jack: "Ain't it grand?"

The key figure in Jack's life is Joe Kennedy (Terry Kinney), the father who would drum into the heads of his eight children that the Kennedys are winners, Irish Catholics who will get into the schools and private clubs of the Protestant Establishment. Little or nothing is said here of how Joe made his money during the Prohibition years or of his long affair with Gloria Swanson. Both Joe and Jack basically agree about women. At one point, Joe says, "Son, your mother is a good woman, but there's sex and there's marriage." Meanwhile, Rose (Diana Scarwid), with whom Jack seems to have no relationship whatsoever, offers homilies: "An effective person is a credit to his family and faith."

While the movie reaches for passion and inspiration, the script by

J. F. K.: Reckless Youth

ABC, Sunday at 9 P.M., 8 central time.

Teleplay by William Broyles Jr., based on the Nigel Hamilton book. Produced and directed by Harry Winer; music by Cameron Allan; director of photography, Jean Lepine; production designer, Armin Ganz; co-producer, Dennis Stuart Murphy; executive producer, Judith A. Polone. A Polone Company production in association with Hearst Entertainment.

John F. Kennedy.....	Patrick Dempsey
Joe Kennedy.....	Terry Kinney
Joe Kennedy Jr.....	Loren Dean
Inga Arvad.....	Yolanda Jilot
Rose Kennedy.....	Diana Scarwid
Kick Kennedy.....	Robin Tunney
Lem Billings.....	Andrew Lowrey
Torb MacDonald.....	Stan Cahill
Ann Cannon.....	Claire Forlani
Honey Fitz.....	Malachy McCourt
St. John.....	James Rebhorn

William Broyles Jr. ("China Beach"), can sometimes seem almost subversive. Even as bright, sophisticated Jack moves steadily toward what everyone knows will be crowning success, and ultimate tragedy, his integrity and idealism are being steadily chipped away. Joe is pulling the strings and disbursing the money.

Jack falls deeply in love with a Danish journalist, Inga Arvad (Yolanda Jilot), but the F.B.I. alleges she is a German spy and Joe quashes that affair in the interests of Jack's "destiny." Running for elective office, Jack does not want to trade in on his wartime PT-109 heroism, but is convinced otherwise and is soon campaigning in his naval officer's uniform. The compromises accelerate, at one point extending even to his grandfather Honey Fitz Fitzgerald (Malachy McCourt).

The message, intended or not: It didn't matter what John Kennedy did. The country and a new medium called television were hungry for something stylish, a touch of glamour, a hint of romance. The first rumblings were being heard in a social upheaval in which image would count for everything. Today, style over substance is as American as a television commercial. Little wonder that the Kennedy story, even in a pedestrian retelling, continues to fascinate.

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Bruce Macaulay/ABC

Patrick Dempsey and Yolanda Jilot in "J. F. K.: Reckless Youth."